

WHO CARE'S? ECHO of every child

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The line of thought of the Experiential Education is not only firmly rooted in the Netherlands and Belgium. Also in “eminent areas” such as for example Sweden the Experiential Education concept has landed after a long journey. After an even longer and harder journey it has arrived successfully in “difficult areas” such as India. In this contribution Marcel van Herpen tells about his experiences in India and makes a connection with the Dutch context.

Marcel: “We see in our projects that the children are doing extremely well with loving counsellors and educationalists. In Bangalore the percentage of relapse into crime is four per cent. That means: four out of a hundred youngsters commit a crime ever again. In the Netherlands that percentage is around seventy per cent. So something really special happens there. I am convinced that it is because we have a connection with them. The people who make the difference are not only hard workers with passion. The most remarkable characteristic of those who are successful is their ‘moral compass’. They all know what they are working for. And that is not their own ego.”

The child owns itself

Marcel: “I think it is beautiful to depart from a general framework, which we all agree about. Those are the children’s rights and the millenium targets. Every child has rights and duties, depending on the context, the cultural background etcetera. In the human rights and the derived children’s rights there are all kinds of important issues, but it starts with the right to live. The matters that follow have direct consequences for the way in which you deal with children. You could say: the child has a right to education, I am a teacher so I meet one of the children’s rights, But the child has also the right to a name, nationality, health, expressing one’s opinion freely etcetera. That means that the teacher must not only teach, but must take care that all the children’s rights are met. So if a child needs medical care you cannot just say: I only do education. You need not operate on it yourself but you must take care of it. It is important that you become aware of what you can mean. That you know what you can have at your disposal and what you cannot

have at your disposal but what you can influence. In fact, if you work with children you should ask yourself: whose child is it? You could say that the child belongs to the parents from its birth. Genetically that is for 50 %, it can never be either the father’s or the mother’s. And after that it meets people it belongs to even less. So the child can definitely not be the teacher’s. My starting point is: the child belongs to itself. You cannot dispose of the child, its happiness and its competences but you can help and counsel it. That emancipated view fits the basic idea of Experiential Education.”

Education is a vital need

Marcel: “In the millenium targets the challenge was formulated that every child has to go to school. It is not for nothing that that is important. In very many areas in the world such as Africa, Asia and America education is the big difference between surviving or not surviving., having a future, having perspective. Here we do not realize this very often because education is commonplace here, It is good to realize this regularly because we think it is self-evident that children go to school. Sometimes it is so self-evident that children do not even like going to school. Education is of specific importance. The essence of education is not that parents are able to work all day. The essence is that you try to develop the child’s potential as optimally as possible. And within Experiential Education we have a very good view of that with well-being and involvement. Involvement means that you know that you develop that potential optimally. And with well-being you know that children become happier. And that is the same in every continent, every country, every village, but also in every school, every class, but it looks different.”



WHO CARE'S?



“If you come in a neighbourhood where education is not self-evident, or certainly not for everybody, you will see an incredible difference:

children in all kinds of situations. Empowering is for me an effect of the millennium targets. There is not a good Dutch translation for empowering.

visible of what every child is and what it needs, is only possible if you are sensitive to the experience of that child in those circumstances, in that family,



These children are in child labour. You see the same face over and over again. A face that looks years older than the children really are. If you are going to a school that is out in the same area a bit further down, you will always see laughing, enthusiastic schoolchildren. Always! Developing is of vital importance. It is a basic need. Giving a child a roof, food and drink so that it will stay alive is not enough. It is for a plant, but not for a human being. ‘That is the way a human being is made’. He wants to become better, wants to be competent, wants to be able to do it himself, wants to be able to do it with others. Relationship, autonomy, competence. Education fulfils a necessary of life!”.

Echo: the sound and empowerment of every child

Marcel: “In India we support Echo; ‘Empowerment for Children and Human Rights Organisation’. With human rights we indicate that you first have to take care that children’s rights are being accepted. We do not only work from these rights but go further than that. We take care that the children can do it themselves. Echo of every child, the co-ordinating name of the movement, aims at empowering

The term has to do with the fact that you take care in your interactions and conditions that the child is able to do it itself. The meaning of empowerment is in the direction of: you are going to do something because of which a child is going to do it itself.

Something can be said about all children: about African, Dutch, Amsterdam, Limburg children etc. But eventually every child is so unique that a specific relationship is necessary in order to empower really. The child only gets confidence in what it can, if you give it confidence. And you can only give it confidence, if you have a relationship with that child. I have not been able to give one single child in India confidence from the Netherlands. Only in a relationship with a child, a child can start doing things which it could not do before. Of course you can empower people eventually with a letter or phone call. But the condition is that contact has been made, that there is solidarity. Empowering means that you really are connected with the inside.

ECHO of every child means for me that you hear the echo, the resounding, the sound of the children specifically. You could say: every child expresses something. You can read something in the eyes of a child. And that becoming

in that situation. It is limited to the context. It is in fact also the essence of Experiential Education. It is about you being occupied by the flow of experiences of that specific child.”

“The characteristic of the work of ECHO of every child is that you get back what you put into it. That their expression is the visibility of their impression. Their impressions is what they express. For example if you think a child is troublesome, it has everything to do with the circumstances and the way you see the child. So, if you are really looking for what lives inside the children, what is going on, if you are looking for their basic needs, if you are looking for what they are good at, not what they are bad in, filling them with love, then you will get that in return, too.”



“This boy was living in the streets”

He was taken and cared for by ECHO. At the moment we were there, the boy had to identify his mother. She was an addicted beggar and she was found dead beside the railway. The boy did not talk. We had a number of cuddly toys with us. We let him choose a cuddly toy that evening to take to bed with him. The next day we were with him in the car for three hours. Then we did not talk with him but with his cuddly toy. We asked questions to that cuddly toy: What things can you do? At a certain moment that cuddly toy could read the paper, drink, drive a car etcetera and the boy let his cuddly toy speak. By means of the cuddly toy we were slowly able to “get into the boy”, make contact and have his experiences flow.

“That is what we did at a larger scale with the box full of feelings.”

There had been a bomb explosion and those children had seen a dead body lying near the bus stop. The children hardly spoke. We started to play with ‘the box of feelings’ and we played all kinds of games round the four basic emotions. Half an hour later they were all telling their story because they had found language and they had got into the flow in which they could express their impressions.

Third world problems in a psychological sense

Marcel: “A crucial question is the question: when are children poor? Many people think children are poor when they have no food, no clothes and no shelter. That is true from a Western perspective. But looking at the child

as a psycho-social being there is an even more fundamental answer to that question. A child is poor at the moment it no longer has a grip on its own life physically or mentally. Those are Third World problems in a psychological sense. As far as I am concerned that is far more profound than accommodation, clothing, food and drink. Of course you have to meet those basic needs and that has often been the starting point: we must make a draw-well for then they will have water, we must take clothes to them for then they will have clothes. In other words: many well-meant initiatives went wrong at distributing goods. The psycho-social aspect was not represented, One did not enter this loving aspect. The deepest longing is that you count as a human being, a loving relationship. Children in war zones for example that stayed with their families, are doing significantly better than children that were taken to a safe zone delinked from their families. A loving relationship is just as important as food and drink for a good life. Loving counselling of teachers and educationalists can make the difference.”

The translation into the Dutch context

Marcel: “In fact it is not different here. If children do not manage in our schools, then that is not because they do not have any clothes, not because they do not have any food. There are children that come to school without food, you just have to give them food of course. There are children that do not get proper medical care; then you have to try and take care of that. But the children that are really not doing well at school are the children that are bullied, the children that are excluded, the children that do not belong to the group. The psychological basic needs of those children are not satisfied; they cannot enter into (good) relationships, cannot develop feelings of self-esteem and cannot develop feelings of competence. The psycho-social problems that you can see in the Third World well, cannot be seen here that well. They are more concealed.”

“What we can see very well because of the Third World is that we have lost the values behind our welfare state and our education. Large groups of youngsters



Marcel van Herpen and the box of feelings

in fact do not want to go to school. 'We' have the money, we have the insight and the possibilities but 'they' do not want to! If you go in a developing country that is too silly for words. There you see that education is the only way to survive. And we have to say to our children: do you know that it is good. Long time ago we designed our education, but we have had this form for such a long time that we no longer ask ourselves what is behind it. For many it no longer has a directly perceptible value. The form comes first. Our education is strongly normative but it has insufficient value for many pupils. And in places in the world where we can hardly speak of education it is absolutely valuable. Every day. Those children are laughing all day, learning and singing because they feel: here I am doing what is necessary."

How do we make our education valuable again?

Marcel: "In the first place it is thinking ecologically. Ecological means that you put yourself in the complete context. So: you are one person in the complete world. And that world is part of a much bigger entity. It is important to see the relativity and the value of one human being. Becoming aware of your place in the universe. When you have become small enough then, so small that you think: what do I then represent? then number two is: taking care that you do not become indifferent or apathetic. Because as little as you are, so powerful you are to realize a lot of things on your own. That is why you must know what you have at your disposal and also know what you do not have at your disposal, but what you can influence. You cannot dispose of one single value, not of respect, not of solidarity. But you can

influence them. From this a constructive attitude develops by which you know that you can influence a lot of things in a positive sense by your acting, but that you cannot dispose of the final result. Mother Theresa did not help India, but she helped patient after patient every day, human being after human being. When you help pupil after pupil every day, human being after human being, then those are hundreds of contacts per day. Then those are thousands of contacts per week. And that is a great many. In short: becoming so small that you think: it is not about me, but remaining so big that you can use your power and energy, your possibilities of growth, talents and competences optimally. It is the balance between indifference, I cannot do anything, a drop in the ocean and just having the power to do what is necessary. I cannot better the world but I can do with one child now what is necessary. That exertion, that energy feels good and is rewarded by the other one. That can even be measured in well-being and involvement."

Who care's?

Marcel: "I think that is a beautiful question because it has a double meaning. It means: what does it matter to me? And: if it matters to you, who is going to give that care? So in the first place: are you bothered, are you touched, or have you seen so much that you get used to it? And if you are moved by it do you talk about it with others or do you do something? Doing makes the difference. Acting. People who are doing something are useful. Acting, that makes the difference."

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